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ABSTRACT

This exercise is intended to help those working with adult basic education (ABE) students gain greater insight into the interests and concerns of adults entering their program. It is a group activity that presumes that at least some of the participants are familiar with entering students. It can be adapted to reflect the traditional two or three classes per week programming or the flexible learning center approach. A chart of the first six hours a student spends in the program is provided to aid staff participants in expressing and sharing their thoughts. It is intended for completion by participants who imagine themselves as being ABE students. They are asked to write down concerns and questions arising during and between learning periods. The chart may also be used individually as a tool for student counseling by having students record interests and changes. (YLB)

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FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE

UNCOVERING STUDENT CONCERNS

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Introduction

The majority of students who leave adult basic education (ABE) courses without reaching their goals do so during the first few hours of the program. In fact, several studies have indicated that well over 50% of such dropouts occur within the first 6 hours. It would seem that these potential adult students feel that their interests and concerns are not being met by the program or that they are not willing to expend the effort that appears necessary in order to reach their goals.

The following exercise was developed to help those working with ABE students gain greater insight into the interests and concerns of adults entering their program. It is a group activity that presumes that at least some of the participants are familiar with entering students. It can be adapted to reflect the traditional two or three classes per week programming or the flexible learning center approach.

Group Activity

The accompanying chart is to serve as an aid to staff participants in expressing and sharing their thoughts. The 6 hours listed down the side of the page represent the first 6 hours a student sends in the program. In the situation illustrated, classes are 2 hours in length and held twice per week. The periods

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The First Six Hours

Hours in Class	Student Interests and Concerns	System Concerns
1		—Recruitment
		—Identification
2		—Assessment

(12 to 46 hours between classes)

3		—Placement
		—Scheduling
4		—Instruction

(12 to 96 hours between classes)

5		—Evaluation
6		

between class sessions are also represented. The 12 to 46 hour period stands for the day or two between weekday classes; the longer period could represent a weekend period. The right side of the page indicates the typical concerns of the program leaders as they introduce potential learners into the instructional program.

One way this chart has been used successfully has been to ask each participant to imagine being an ABE student who has entered a program similar to theirs. What would be their concerns and questions during the first 2 hours in the learning center or classroom? Once each participant has had time to note several concerns, small group discussions can begin. Should the leader so desire, discussion can move from a sharing of concerns to a review of methods for dealing with such concerns. The next step is to have participants note and then share student concerns that might arise between the first and second attendance at the program. The leader can move to each learning episode and period between meetings as participant discussion warrants.

Questions frequenting raised during the first learning period relate to information needs. What's expected of me? How much time and effort will it take? Costs? But fears also surface. Can I still learn? What's the teacher like? The concerns raised during the second learning period tend to move toward relationships with teachers and other students. More evaluation of whether school is really worth it also occurs.

Discussion of student concerns that arise during periods between learning sessions are very useful in helping staff members appreciate how the family, work, and social environment of the students affect their learning efforts. Classroom activities can then be planned to build on the positive elements from these and to help overcome possible barriers that may be developing.

Individual Activity

The group activity builds upon the teacher's experiences in the classroom. However, this chart can also be used individually as a tool for student counseling. During the intake process, the teacher can caution the student that the first few hours of class are the most threatening and the hardest with which to deal. To help overcome this, the teacher can ask the students to keep a log on the chart of the major concerns that they have during the first 6 class hours and to record the interests which they become

aware of during this period. In addition, since education is a process that affects one's total life, the students can be encouraged to keep tract of events between the first class meetings that are outside of class but which are related to their attendance in the program.

This activity can sensitize students to the impact of education on their lives and make them critically aware of the change that is taking place. It can legitimatize the pressures and anxieties that the students are facing. In informal counseling sessions with the teacher, the chart can contain the documentation for focusing the dialogue on the student's true needs and interests.

The right side of the chart can be used to explain the needs of the system to the students. Too often students are unaware of the institutional needs required to keep the program in operation. By discussing these needs with the students, the teacher can help the them (a) see how they fit into the overall operation of the program, (b) become aware of the available services in the program, and (c) understand the reasons for various administrative procedures. This can also provide an avenue for students' feedback of existing rules and procedures.

Conclusion

The first 6 hours of class are a critical period in the life of an ABE student. They can make the difference between a student continuing on toward a positive experience with increased literacy or a student encountering another disappointment and lost of learning. Regardless of whether the teachers generate the knowledge by searching their own experiences for clues to student interests and concerns during this period or by directly consulting with the students themselves, constructive actions can be taken to ensure that the initial contacts with the ABE program are rich, warm, and rewarding.